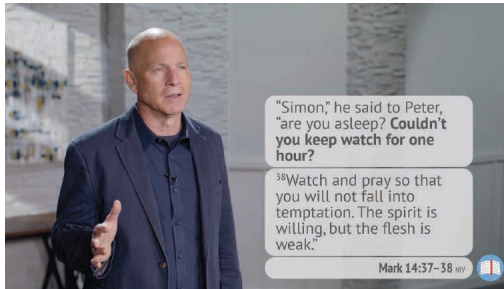


Obstacles to Prayer

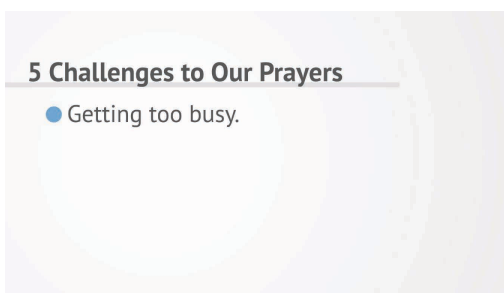
Sometimes it seems like as soon as you sit down to pray, the phone rings or the dog barks or a fly gets stuck in the window or there's someone at the door. And then, as soon as you settle in again, you start thinking about something you have to do and you can't get it out of your mind.

Do you ever get distracted when you pray? You're not alone. I struggle with it too. Anyone who makes an effort to pray will have to deal with it sometimes. And we're in good company. Think about the disciples and Jesus' words to Peter that night in the garden of Gethsemane when He came back and found them sleeping: "Couldn't you keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mark 14:37-38).

We know that weakness, but Jesus' own words here show us that it doesn't have to keep us from praying. We *can* do it. Yes, sometimes prayer *will* be a battle. Our adversary the devil knows that if he can keep us from praying he can defeat us on so many levels, because then we're living in our own strength, disconnected from our heavenly Father, who is the source of all life and power. But if we examine the obstacles we face when we pray, with God's help we will find a way through them. Today we're going to look at five separate challenges to our prayers and how we can overcome them.

Here's the first: We simply get too busy. You know how that can be. We can start the day with the best intentions that we will spend time with God in prayer and in His Word, but first there's just one little thing we have to do. And before you know it, that one little thing leads to another and another, until we find ourselves rushed through the end of the day, exhausted, with little satisfaction in our souls. We end up parched and dry because we've had no living water. C.S. Lewis gives an apt description of how a day like that begins:

It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice,





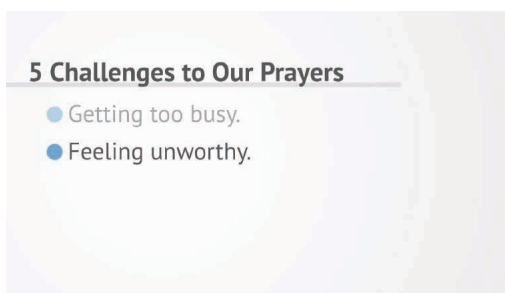
taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussing and frettings; coming in out of the wind. (*Mere Christianity*).

We desperately need to do this. To begin each day with God, praising Him and humbling ourselves before Him, opening ourselves to His leading and His love. This is a conscious choice we have to make. We may not be able to have a devotional time first thing in the morning because of a toddler tugging at us or for another reason (so it may have to happen a little later), but the important thing is that we begin each day by consciously committing ourselves to God and “letting that larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in,” as Lewis put it. Let your first thoughts be of God, no matter what you’re doing. Give yourself to Him, ask Him to lead you and fill you with His Spirit and to keep you close. Run to Him, first of all. And then make time spent with Him—even if it’s just ten minutes—a daily priority. Find the time whenever it is during the day and devote it to Him, so that you can love Him with all your heart, soul, and strength. So much depends on this. We need to do it!

Now, because we are busy, there are a number of distractions that spring up like weeds as soon as we start to pray—like a persistent worry, for example. And the best thing we can do with that worry is turn it into prayer that very moment. I also keep my planner right beside me when I pray because it seems like I always start thinking about something I need to do—even a whole list of things. So I just write it down so that I can get it out of my thoughts and focus on what’s really important. And of course, not every distraction is from our adversary—sometimes, they’re from God. If that two-year-old is tugging at you, what a great time to take her in your arms and pray for her for a moment and ask God to bless her.

Now for the second obstacle to our praying: Feeling unworthy. In our daily struggle with what one theologian called “the unholy trinity of the world, the flesh, and the devil,” whenever we have made the wrong choice and sinned, our adversary will do his best to not let us forget it. As soon as you sit down to pray, there will be that nagging thought: “Do you think He’s going to listen to you? Do you really believe that God is going to answer your prayers after what you’ve done and the ways you’ve messed up?” Those are devastating thoughts.

Martin Luther once commented that when the devil came knocking

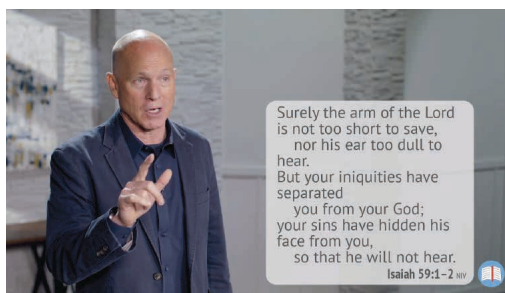




at his heart's door, he let Jesus answer it. And Jesus would say, "Martin Luther used to live here, but now I'm the master of this house." And the devil, seeing Him, would leave immediately. If we have received Jesus and repented of our sins and sincerely turned from them to Him, we can trust Him to receive us as His very own. His Word promises, "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). Our sins are grievous things—the very reason Jesus went to the cross. But God's Word reminds us that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). So we can come, knowing we are loved. That's why 2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV) reminds us, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." We are not who we once were. And so we can come to Him and we can know we're accepted and loved.

5 Challenges to Our Prayers

- Getting too busy.
- Feeling unworthy.
- Sin that becomes an idol in our hearts.



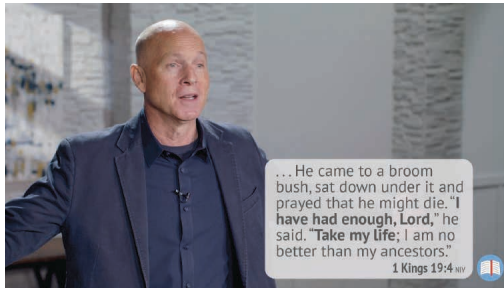
But there is a third obstacle that we have to mention when we're discussing sin and prayer, and that is sin that becomes an idol in our hearts. Sin that we are holding on to in our hearts, refusing to let go of, can cause real problems for our prayers. It affects how we pray and what happens when we pray. Listen to the words of Psalm 66:18: "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." We need to ask ourselves, What are the sins in my life that I cherish? Those places where we're saying, "No, Lord, I won't give this up!" Is there a place in our lives where we're giving into the world instead of listening to His Word? The witness of Scripture is clear: cherishing sin in our hearts is an obstacle to God answering our prayers. The prophet Isaiah told God's people, "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1-2). Jesus said this, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7). There is clearly a connection between our obedience and the effectiveness of our prayers. Sin grieves the Spirit of God (Ephesians 4:30), because what we are saying when we cherish sin in our hearts is, "Lord, I love this more than you." And the only remedy is to confess our sin and ask for His help to overcome it. As we ask Jesus to fill us with new love for Him, love for Him will keep us from sin because we don't want to grieve Him. And there will be new life in our prayers.



Now for the fourth obstacle: Discouragement over previous prayers. Chances are you've had the experience of praying about

5 Challenges to Our Prayers

- Getting too busy.
- Feeling unworthy.
- Sin that becomes an idol in our hearts.
- Discouragement over previous prayers.



something and nothing seems to change. It might have been something very important to you, like the health of a loved one or a marital relationship, or a wayward son or daughter. Under those circumstances, we can be easily discouraged and ask ourselves "Why pray?" when our prayers seem to make little difference. If you've ever felt like that, you're in good company. No less a prophet than Elijah struggled with discouragement even after he had seen God do amazing things. Not long after a great victory, he's fleeing with fear; and he actually prays, as we saw in the previous lesson, "I have had enough, LORD. . . . Take my life" (1 Kings 19:4). Talk about an honest prayer! But not long after that, God helps him.

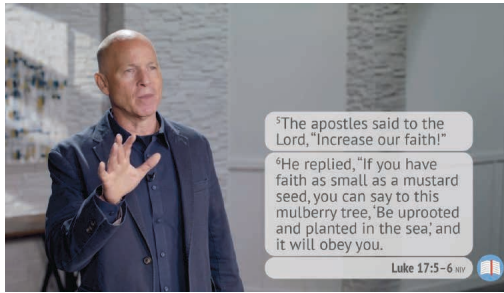
What Elijah does here shows us how to handle our discouragements and disappointments, whatever they may be. Bring them to God. Give them to Him directly. "Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you," Psalm 55:22 promises. As the father of a former prodigal, I can tell you that I've done this more than once; and God has ways of showing Himself faithful. It may take time, but as we lean into Him and commit ourselves to Him, He will meet us in even the most difficult places.

And that brings us to the fifth obstacle to our praying, and that is a lack of faith. When James writes about asking God for wisdom, he tells us that when we ask, we "must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown . . . by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:6-7). Jesus frequently talked about the importance of faith when we pray; and sometimes He told the disciples that they had little faith. Matthew 13:58 also tells us that when Jesus visited His hometown, "He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith." I don't want to live in that place, do you? I don't want my life to be that place. But sometimes it has been. We live in a cynical age, and we can easily be caught up in its ways of thinking. When a prayer has been answered, we can be tempted to think of it as "just a coincidence," and then the next time maybe we won't pray.

How different this is from the way God wants us to live. He wants us to live with expectant minds and hearts and a childlike sense of wonder. He wants us to ask "Why not?" To think creatively about His love and power and to be thankful for the smallest blessings. One day the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Increase our faith!" (Luke 17:5). What a great prayer to pray! Jesus said in response, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this

5 Challenges to Our Prayers

- Getting too busy.
- Feeling unworthy.
- Sin that becomes an idol in our hearts.
- Discouragement over previous prayers.
- A lack of faith.



mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you" (Luke 17:6). In other words, just the smallest amount of faith, placed in God's hands, can do amazing things, which is why we need to ask for it.

Let's conclude today's lesson with a prayer for more faith, and that God will help us overcome every obstacle to drawing near to Him.

Lord Jesus, please, yes, increase our faith. We ask this just like the disciples asked. Lord help us to love You most of all. Remove every idol from our hearts, so that You are first, so that we press into You with love and with our prayers. In Your name we pray, amen.